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RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHBW #1627/01 3440638
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 100638Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY BELGRADE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1850
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BELGRADE 001627

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SR](#) [KV](#) [BK](#)

SUBJECT: The Sandzak: Ugljanin's Fiefdom

REF: BELGRADE 1394

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Sandzak is one of the last vestiges of Milosevic-era rule in Serbia where a local politician holds on to his power base through manipulation, coercion, and intimidation. However, this Muslim-populated area appears primed for a political opening, as Novi Pazar Mayor Ugljanin's tactics are beginning to show their wear, and local political, religious, and civic leaders are beginning to find their unified voice. Mirroring this political shift is the pending resolution of an intra-religious feud between feuding muftis, which could further weaken Ugljanin's influence. If the leaders can act in a unified manner, Sandzak has the potential to shake from its authoritarian past and could serve as a bridge providing economic growth and stability in southwest Serbia, and the border regions with Montenegro, Bosnia, and Kosovo. But there is little indication that Ugljanin will relinquish his power either quietly or honestly. End Summary.

Mayor Ugljanin: Sandzak's Solution or Sandzak's Milosevic

¶2. (SBU) Mayor Sulejman Ugljanin told DCM, on her December 3-4 visit to Novi Pazar, that Sandzak was confronted by difficult problems requiring international assistance. He claimed that he was not the cause of those problems, but instead, part of the solution. Ugljanin blamed the United States for the recent split in the local Islamic community (reftel), and accused the United States of supporting "that murderer" Mufti Muamer Zukorlic. He blamed Zukorlic for the lack of rule of law in Novi Pazar and accused him of supporting criminal and fundamentalist elements. Ugljanin repeated the accusation floating around in Belgrade's Islamic circles that Zukorlic was running a shooting range in the basement of his private Islamic university. When questioned about the lackluster performance of the local police under his control during the November 16 mosque shootings, Ugljanin responded disingenuously that he was committed to improving the rule of law, the judiciary, and working with the United States. He asked for U.S. and OSCE assistance in these efforts. Following the meeting, Ugljanin called in his local press and reported he had had a productive talk with the DCM highlighting "the need for reform of the police force, judiciary and public prosecutor's office." DCM stressed the need for calm and rule of law.

Opposition Parties and NGOs Seeking Common Cause

¶3. Local opposition leaders and NGOs in the Sandzak described their strong concern over about Ugljanin's repressive rule over Novi Pazar tactics but emphasized they wanted to cooperate in an effort to bring about political change in the Sandzak. Aida Corovic of local NGO Urban In told the DCM that Ugljanin, whom she called "Sandzak's Milosevic," maintained power through voter intimidation and restricting control of the local media. Ugljanin, she and other NGO representatives said, employed local "thugs," separate from the police, to bully local citizens into submission and apathy. In a

separate meeting, a local judge who is part of a Serbia-wide movement to establish an independent judiciary supported these statements, noting that he had received death threats and directly fingered Ugljanin and his "shock troops" as the culprits. In response to DCM's question, the judge said Ugljanin's mechanism for sustaining his unpopular control was by liberal use of these shock troops. They would tell people how to vote, which mosque to go to and when to show up for Ugljanin rallies. The judge said the shock troops led the demonstration in front of the Zukorlic-controlled mosque, shoving their way through those waiting to go to prayer and trying to start fights. The judge described these shock troops as "buzz-cut body builder mercenaries with extensive rap sheets."

¶4. Representatives of the opposition Sandzak Democratic Party (SDP, led by Labor and Social Policy Minister Rasim Ljajic) said they were considering new local alliances in order to defeat Ugljanin at the polls at upcoming municipal elections, most likely to be held in the spring of 2008. SDP Spokesperson Mirosad Jusufovic said, SDP, which is already partnered with the Democratic Party (DS), was already talking to the local Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) branch about combining for a single candidates' list, since the LDP could help attract Serb voters in this predominantly Muslim region. Hajram Djekic, Director of the local LDP office, left open the possibility of a coalition and said the LDP was focusing its campaign efforts on winning the support of the youth, who were heavily disenfranchised in this region of high unemployment and few opportunities. Representatives of both the LDP and SDP complained of the difficulty of getting their messages out on the street due to Ugljanin's control over local media. NGO representatives had also complained bitterly about lack of independent media. Jusufovic of SDP said well trained poll observers would be extremely important in the upcoming municipal elections and asked for U.S. assistance in training local election monitors.

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¶5. SDP had begun the meeting saying local television already was carrying Ugljanin's photo op with the DCM and expressing their concerns that Ugljanin was manipulating DCM's visit to somehow show that the United States supported him. This was transparently hypocritical, they said, because Ugljanin repeatedly appeared on television blaming the United States for all of Novi Pazar's problems, including instigating the mufti feud. SDP then arranged a joint press statement with Hajrudin Hajrovic, President of SDP's Novi Pazar chapter, and DCM emphasizing SDP's long-term cooperation with the United States and our joint desire for democratic and economic reform and stability for the Sandzak.

Mufti Dispute Dissipating

¶6. (SBU) During DCM's conversations with the two claimants to Serbia's Supreme Mufti status, it became clear that the Ugljanin (and DSS) engineered putsch was losing steam. Though Zukorlic began his meeting saying he was "angry" with the DCM for meeting Ugljanin-annointed Adem Zilkic, he was visibly more confident and in control than he was during the November 13 meeting in Belgrade immediately before the shootings. Appearing statesmanlike in his ornate office compound and surrounded by local supporting imams, Zukorlic noted positively the increased attention by the diplomatic community in the Sandzak over the past several months. He told DCM he was encouraged that he had successfully organized several thousand people in the streets of Novi Pazar on December 1 in support of the upcoming Hadj to Mecca. Ugljanan and Zilkic had attempted to promote a counter-event, but were only able to muster 50 supporters. In response to Zukorlic's "anger," DCM reiterated that diplomats were not politicians and meetings with various interlocutors could not and should not be interpreted as shows of support. Zukorlic repeated the SDP's apprehension that the local community was not sophisticated enough to understand diplomatic nuances and would view any meeting with a U.S. diplomat as an indication of U.S. support.

¶7. (SBU) In a separate meeting, a clearly unhinged Zilkic, appearing alone in a simple storefront office, told the DCM that the he still hoped to resolve the religious dispute between him and

Zukorlic peacefully, and hoped he could get Ugljanin and Lajic to meet in order to help resolve the situation. Sounding desperate and defeated, he once again pitched the need for a Belgrade-based Reis for Serbia, saying that without its own Reis the Muslim community in Serbia would be further fractured and split. Zilkic said he was concerned that with the probable pending loss of Kosovo, Serbia's Muslims would further lose their influence in Serbian political and social life. As DCM was attempting to leave, Zilkic practically prostrated himself asking if DCM thought what he had done was wrong and begging for the United States to "help."

Comment

18. (SBU) Ugljanin is a fascinating by-product of Milosevic's brutal rein. Originally a founding member of former Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic's Democratic Action Party (SDA), Ugljanin actively began arming Sandzak to secede from Serbia in the early 1990's. When his co-conspirators were arrested in 1993, Ugljanin managed to escape to Turkey. Though he visited Sarajevo every year during the war (DCM first met him in Sarajevo in 1994), flying in via Turkey, he remained wanted until he arrived in Belgrade in 1996, on a regularly scheduled Yugoslav Airlines Flight and was escorted by police escort back to Novi Pazar. Though still the subject of considerable speculation, it is clear that Milosevic allowed him to return and would not have done so without Ugljanin's support. Ugljanin's SDP party subsequently dropped its ties to the Bosnian branch and went into coalition with Prime Minister Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) following Milosevic's ouster. Ugljanin is now closely associated with Kostunica and Kostunica's policies. Kostunica is widely believed to have engineered the Mufti feud through his cat's paw in the Sandzak, Ugljanin, in order both to keep Serbia in a constant state of chaos and also to position himself and Ugljanin as major beneficiaries of restitution of Islamic lands to the Islamic community when the restitution law is implemented in 2008.

19. (SBU) Ugljanin increasingly has used more brutal tactics to stay in power, including stealing the last local elections in 2006, when his shock troops were widely deployed to intimidate voters and stuff ballot boxes. Though his influence over the local political culture, media and judiciary still permeates the Sandzak, and he still has a sizable populist base, there appears to be a new emboldened current of opposition. With the recent reaffirmation of Zukorlic's religious authority and a developing commitment among previously fractured NGO's and political parties to work cooperatively towards upcoming municipal elections, Ugljanin's grasp on political control is vulnerable. Given his history, he is unlikely to relinquish this control easily or honestly and will certainly employ his supporters and his muscle on the street to counteract any electoral challenge. Post will continue to provide assistance to Sandzak's democratic parties and will be increasingly present in the Sandzak both to show Ugljanin we are watching and to

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further bolster democratic forces. End Comment.

MUNTER